

Just a start

'The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, Son of God.'

Yes, yes, we know all about that,

let's move on and get to grips with the story.

But let's not.

Let's stay with that very first verse of Mark's Gospel

and see what it says to us.

In the play the Mousetrap,

the inspector is bogus and is actually the murderer.

In Agatha Christie's Murder at the Vicarage,

the Vicar is innocent.

In Dorothy L Sayers Gaudy Night,

Harriet Vane gets off at last with Lord Peter Wimsey.

The English Patient

is neither English or patient.

What am I doing,

giving away the punchline

of the story at the very start?

I ought to be locked up!

But that is precisely

what St Mark is doing with his gospel,

the beginning of the Good News

of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

This is not a book

where the plot is going to subtly develop

where all will be revealed in the final reel.

Mark sets out his entire stall at the very start.

A reporter overheard two old ladies

chatting during the musical Jesus Christ Superstar.

'This is the second time I've seen it,

but it's so much more enjoyable now I know the plot!'

We all know the plot.

Mark has given it away at the very start.

Signalling that his book is not so much to convert people,
as to educate the converted about this Jesus.

In a sense people should approach Mark's Gospel
like they approach a doctor,
with a list of their symptoms:

'I keep jarring my neck when I walk through a low door,

I can only walk with a stick,

I'm allergic to quiche.

What's wrong with me?'

'Nothing really, except you're a bishop!'

I guess people were approaching Mark

with a list of symptoms:

'I feel so alive,

life has such a buzz,

I'm filled with so much love,

I can't stop thinking about this man, Jesus.

What on earth is wrong with me?'

'Let me explain,' replies Mark,

'The beginning of the Gospel of Jesus Christ,
the Son of God...'

The beginning.

Actually in the Greek it's just a beginning,

a beginning which stars a wild wilderness man
preparing the way of the Lord.

Mark is modest,

allowing for other beginnings,

virgins espoused to a man named Joseph at Nazareth,
stables and shepherds in Bethlehem,

seeking kings and murderous kings and flights to Egypt,

philosophical treatises,

'In another beginning was the Word...'

A beginning,

just a beginning,

begging the question,

where does your Gospel of this man Jesus begin?

And the word begin

flags up that this is just the start of it,

not the end of it but the start of it.

You can't just read this Gospel

and then tick the box,

'Been there, done that, done Him.'

This is just the start of it.

This Gospel,

this story continues with you!

Now Gospel is another word

we rush past without noticing.

Literally,

Good News.

Yet what follows is a mix of bad and good.

Miraculous healings,

storms are calmed,

the hungry fed,

such stories which tell of God being close as touch.

Definitely good news.

Yet bad news too.

Disciples like Devon Cream –

thick and clotted.

Terrible rejections and dark betrayals waiting in the wings.

Public humiliation,

the torture of an excruciating scourging,

topped by crucifixion.

Absolutely awful news!

Yet Mark claims this is all good news,
that God and his cheer
is to be found as much in the terrible darkness
as in the marvellous light.

And then we have the star of the Good News,
the chief actor's titles,
Jesus Christ, the Son of God.

Jesus, Joshua, the one who saves,
a common name in Jesus' time.

Christ is not surname,

Mr and Mrs Christ and their baby son,

but means anointed one in Greek,

the chosen one,

Messiah in Hebrew.

'This is the one!'

The Son of God,

- I accidentally typed Song of God

which doesn't seem a slip far from the Kingdom of Heaven!

- The Son of God,

omitted in some versions of Mark's Gospel,

goes hand in glove

with the term Christ.

The ancient kings of Israel were hailed as God's son

in that they were seen,

or hoped to be seen

as God's spokesman,

God's perfect ambassador and representative,

God & Son:

one firm,

one message,

one goal.

Of course, all the kings of Israel

'did what was wrong in the eyes of the Lord'

and failed to live up to his Sonship.

But here in Jesus

we have the real thing,

the real works:

'Truly this man is the Son of God.'

So much so that there is a family resemblance

explored and spelt out in detail

in Matthew and Luke's Gospel's beginnings.

'He doesn't half take after his dad!'

Mark tells us at his Gospel's start.

But back to that word, start.

The Greek word

'αρχη

has a double meaning,

like fair as in

'I went to the fair and won a coconut'

and

'The weather's set fair.'

or Moped

and moped,

as in

'He moped around on his Moped.'

'αρχη

can mean either

beginning

or rule.

Maybe a studied ambiguity.

Here's a beginning...

...here's a rule to set your life by.

Go away this second Sunday in Advent,

traditionally Bible Sunday,

and read Mark's beginning, Mark's rule.

As Barbara Cartland is supposed to have said,
'I'm going to Spain for six months to finish a book'
to which someone quipped,
'Ah yes, I'm a slow reader myself!'
But I'd defy even the slowest reader
to take more than two hours to finish Mark.

Except we're all slow readers
when it comes to Mark
and Jesus his subject,
because we'll never finish him.

Every storm we'll hear Jesus saying,
'Hush be still'

Every hungry crowd we'll yearn to feed
with five loaves and two fishes,
praying that Jesus will take our little
and make it much.

Every aching soul we'll long to be cheered
with Christ's healing touch.

Every dread death we encounter
we will hear the message of the angels,

'He is not here, he is risen!'

The beginning
and the continuation
of the Gospel
of Jesus Christ
the Son of God.